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When we wrote the first edition of *Ethnographic Fieldwork*, social life was still very much seen as an offline affair. People used to refer to the digital world as the *virtual* one, implying that it was in some way not part of the real world. As for new media, Facebook was an infant and the iPhone was a toddler when we wrote the book, and social media activities were widely seen as a relatively irrelevant add-on of 'real' (read: offline) social life.

The online-offline nexus

A decade later, this can obviously no longer be maintained. The online world is now fully integrated with the offline one, in the sense that very few of our ordinary, everyday activities proceed without being in some way affected by online infrastructures; and very many of such activities *can* only proceed due to the existence of such online dimensions of life. From making photographs with our smartphones to checking the weather app, the traffic app, or our daily fitness routine app, and from online shopping, travel booking, banking and reading to quick searches (aptly called, in many places, "Googling"), to TV-on-demand binging, vloggers and influencers, livestreamed events and commercial as well as political campaigns waged on social media – our social, cultural, economic and political lives have changed dramatically. The widespread use of social media has transformed the media and popular culture landscapes globally and has shifted the boundaries between the private and the public spheres. And each action we perform online, however minute, generates data that are aggregated into new systems of surveillance and control and affect our lives in mostly invisible ways. Note that while such developments are spread unevenly across the globe, there are few places in the world where they are not experienced to some degree.

These phenomena are by now well documented, so we don't think that a full survey of them is warranted here. The fundamental fact we have to take on board is: *we live our lives largely in an online-offline nexus*, in which both dimensions are equally vital and indispensable. Yet, when it comes to social theory and method, we still very much continue to approach these

lives from within frameworks developed to describe and analyze an offline world – and ethnography is no exception to this (Kaur-Gill & Dutta 2017; Dong 2017, 2018; Blommaert 2018; Varis & Hou 2019). This is not unusual: theory is always slow to catch up with changing realities, and theories that incorporate change as a fundamental given are few and far between. The same goes for method: scholars are usually reluctant to surrender tools of investigation of which they believe that they worked adequately in the past.

When it comes to ethnographic fieldwork, however, we cannot avoid issues of theoretical and methodical adequacy, for a very simple reason: in the online-offline nexus, the field where we do our fieldwork has gone online, and we need to follow that route if we wish to adequately address what it is we observe and analyze.

In what follows, we will offer three reflections on this new field and show how they complicate matters for ethnographers (and others). To be sure, things were complicated enough in an offline field; when we incorporate the online field, however, several new things require focused attention. We need to add some question marks to three seemingly unproblematic things: *what* do we see? *Who* is there? And *where* are we in an online-offline fieldwork site.

What do we see? The compelling bubble

The first complication is caused by what is known as the 'bubble effect': whenever we go online, we find ourselves in a space the structure and composition of which has been configured *algorithmically*, on the basis of data profiles for specific users, machines and software tools. And this is an absolute given: there is no actual PC or smartphone in the world that offers its user an unrestricted view of the online world. Not to put too fine a point of it: whenever you go online on any device, anywhere and anytime, you will encounter *bias*, and there is simply no neutral and unbiased position of observation possible in the online world. This is worth remembering: using the PC of, say, your local public library to do online research doesn't remove the bubble effect. It merely (largely) removes *your own* particular bubble effect, the one affecting actions on your usual devices due to your particular history of use of these devices; but it replaces it with the bubble of *the other* specific computer, network and community of users who worked on it before you logged on.

Now, we did spent quite a good amount of time in the previous chapters explaining that bias is a normal and altogether not too problematic feature of *any* ethnographic fieldwork, and that

the response to it must be *awareness of bias*. Remember: ethnographic knowledge is inter-subjective knowledge, co-constructed by all participants in the process. Seen from that perspective, the bubble effects are mere extensions of the inevitable bias inscribed in our fieldwork practices. But let's remove the word 'mere' from the previous sentence, for the extension we see is an extension in another direction – a shift, in other words. And the shift has to do with the meaning of inter-subjective in what preceded. When you interact with an online device, you're not interacting with a particular person whose subjectivity (and, of course, bias) can be to some extent explained and understood in terms of one's social, cultural, personal backgrounds – the 'context' as we know it from the literature. You're interacting with a machine that incorporates and creates contexts that require very different modes of interpretation.

In a moment, we shall be more specific – and constructive – about this problem of online contexts. But for the moment, let's take this on board: going online takes your field in a direction which is not in any way a direct reflection of the offline contexts you, as an ethnographic fieldworker, got accustomed to through intense interactions with the people you work with; it sends you into a different sociocultural realm and confronts you with modes of bias that are sometimes impossible to understand, let alone anticipate or predict in research. The social facts we can observe online are mediated and curated by technologies in complex synergies with their users. Overlooking this point (and it is compelling) can cause you some trouble in making sense of what goes on in the lives of the people you work with in fieldwork.

But there is more.

Who is there?

In the tradition of social research, one thing used to be quite straightforward: the identity of the people one did research with or about – the 'population' in one's research. People's identities were *known*, and researchers could believe that they knew them well. So well, in fact, that we could anonymize them in our research outcomes, and that we felt compelled to do so because our research had actually revealed so much about them that they could be construed as identifiable individuals. Anthropological 'informants' were only useful, so to speak, when a measure of intimacy had been established between the anthropologist and the 'informant' allowing more than mere superficial knowledge to be exchanged.

This knowledge of the population was grounded, as Michel Foucault (2008) described, in some of the great structures of modernity: nation-state bureaucracy and its elaborate inventories of people residing on the state's territory. From birth certificates through school reports, hospital records, police files and intelligence reports, passports, tax returns, occupational, demographic and income data and the cyclical census: one of the purposes (indeed, needs) of the modern state was comprehensive knowledge of its population. An elaborate bureaucratic infrastructure served that purpose and statistics emerged as the science that could answer questions evolving from all that. As the name itself reveals, statistics was the science of the state. And statistics came up with methodologically refined tools such as the sample to turn knowledge of the population into measurable, user-friendly units with almost infinite opportunities for application.

All of this was achieved in an offline world; the present online-offline nexus offers some serious problems. The first one is infrastructural. Whereas states used to be unchallenged when it came to gathering and elaborating knowledge at a very high scale-level – that of the *entire* population, this monopoly has vanished. The state now competes with (and often relies upon) *private* corporate actors when it comes to such high-scale level knowledge. It is the likes of Google, Microsoft, Huawei, Facebook, Weibo who are the great data collectors and analysts presently: companies who collaborate with the state but who are formally independent from it, and who have the capacity to independently develop (as well as *own* and sell for profit) big data handling and machine learning tools and products. Knowledge of populations nowadays is distributed over more actors, many of which fall outside the *raison d'état* which Foucault saw as the engine behind modern population studies.

Such private actors can and do impose rules of their own – the scale level we used to define as 'public' is now governed by a range of different and sometimes conflicting modes of governance. And such new modes of governance deeply affect this self-evident part of social studies: knowledge about who is involved in social action.

As all of us know, the online world is populated by people operating through an alias. Trolls and members of obscure debating groups in the darker corners of the Web instantly come to mind; we also know that some online platforms are very vulnerable to interventions by automated bots and hired clickfarm operators sending out updates and responding to them; but in many cases there are also strong social and political incentives to remain anonymous when engaging in online activities. One's employer may not be amused when an employee

regularly posts social media updates criticizing the company or articulating views that can be perceived as damaging to the company's interests; security forces may be alerted by strong political criticism voiced by people online; or one's spouse would not appreciate one's active presence on dating sites. In online environments where people are aware of surveillance and censorship, one's mere presence on a forum can be experienced as risky, and participants will adjust their behavior accordingly – primarily by hiding identity features that might lead to easy identification (cf. Du 2016). The effect is: billions of online 'profiles' about whom interlocutors cannot assume any identity feature with any degree of certainty: the exciting 24-year old woman with whom one flirts on a dating site might actually be a 55-year old, married and quite boring man. And the revolutionary activist who eagerly invites and endorses your politically inflammatory updates might actually be a state security agent.

At the frontstage of the online world, identity uncertainty rules. The real identities of online actors are, as a rule, only known backstage by institutional actors: by internet and platform providers, the authorities and the security services. But hackers prove on a daily basis that even that level of certainty about who is online is not entirely bulletproof.

As said before, the online world provides entirely new contexts for all of us. The effects for fieldwork are momentous. While, in offline fieldwork, you can ask friends and neighbors, or colleagues and bystanders for information about particular individuals, your opportunities for doing so in online research are extremely limited – as a rule, you cannot be sure that the neighbor you invite to offer background information about someone is not, in effect, a neighbor at all. So as a rule, you can only observe what you *see people do* in online fieldwork sites. Getting feedback about who did what, however, is terribly difficult and – to add to the mess – not very reliable. For the online sources you'd approach for such feedback are almost by definition as elusive as the target of your inquiry with them. The fieldworker, consequently, is often reduced to the role of *witness* rather than that of investigator, and left with very few tools for upgrading one's role from witness to investigator. So take this as a given: in online fieldwork it is often immensely difficult to establish the intimate knowledge one can construct about offline respondents.

But there is more, and we need to return to the bubble effects we discussed earlier. Recall what we said there: the bubble shapes a context for social action on the basis of 'profiles' created by data aggregations. So here is yet another level of backstage identity construction: one not directly performed by ourselves but imposed on us by machines and influencing what

we can do and effectively do online. Obviously, this also affects what a fieldworker can observe online.

Let us make this a bit clearer. The bubble brings people into your orbit whose profiles have been constructed by algorithms. These people are, also in official parlance, 'data subjects' constructed out of hypothetically common features based on aggregations of users' data. As we said before, the criteria by means of which people are connected to aggregations of data are very difficult to get access to – it is safe to assume that we cannot know the grounds on which algorithms judge that certain people are similar to us, share interests, behavioral or character traits sensed to be compatible with ours, and could be brought into some kind of community alongside us. We can provide educated guesses, no more. But since bubble effects are inevitable, the upshot of all of this is that we observe very peculiar, curated social facts, full of uncertainties about who is involved in their performance. And note that the uncertainty about who is there in your online fieldwork site is individual as well as collective; it applies to the actual interlocutors whose online actions you observe, as well as to the communities that fill the bubble in which you roam. This is particularly so when your research targets social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and so forth.

This has serious effects. Imagine now that you'd wish to run a survey online, using a platform such as Twitter. How will you construct a reliable sample in which sociological diacritics such as gender, age, location, education background and religion are adequately spread – when none of this can be established with certainty? How can you reach 'everyone' whenever you attempt to speak about a population – when you are mindful of the bubble effect? How can you even identify *individual* actors when the same person can have eight different Twitter accounts? And how can you be sure that '@EddieJones1991' is not the 28-year old Welsh accountant he claims to be, living in Liverpool with his wife and two young kids and enthusiastically endorsing the Tories, but in fact an automated bot or a clickfarm account operated from Bangalore, India?

All of these issues about who is who online dislodge the certainties used as baseline assumptions in more than a century of (offline) social research, and they render forms of research still hanging on to such assumptions very doubtful indeed. In a moment, we shall offer some hope for ethnographically inclined researchers. But first we need to address a third major complication of the online-offline nexus.

Where are we? Invisible lines

Let us briefly recapitulate. We have seen that the online-offline nexus seriously complicates two things we used to consider rather unproblematic in offline fieldwork: *what* we (can) observe, and *who* is involved in what we observe. The bubble effect and the uncertainty about participants in social action online render both highly problematic now, and they must serve as a critical check on the kinds of claims we believe we can make in our research. There is a third obvious dimension of social action which is profoundly distorted by the online-offline nexus: the *site* where we perform our research.

For evident reasons, the site of fieldwork used to be perhaps its least problematic aspect. As outlined in the previous chapters, we used to choose a place for our research based on prior knowledge and a round of thorough preparatory study. Next, we would pack our gear and head off to that place. Yes, we emphasized, the actual *meaning* of that place would change during fieldwork as a result of accumulated knowledge – the school we chose as our site would gradually transform into a more complex habitat for those involved in the activities in that school, including the fieldworker. But in many ways, our choice of fieldwork site would define and constrict our assumptions about participants and the actions they engage in. We knew that, to stick to the example of a school, some transcontextual analysis was required, for many of the actions performed locally (and offline) by teachers, pupils and other local stakeholders would be inflected by things such as education policy, management principles and other forms of external pressure and influence. In the online-offline nexus, however, the meaning of 'transcontextual' has changed quite profoundly.

Two dimensions of this change need to be identified. In both instances, the guiding question is: how can we understand what goes on in our chosen fieldwork site?

The first dimension has to do with the nature of the activities we observe locally. Let us start with an anecdote. A little while ago, one of us was required to check attendances at the start of a class. The usual signup form started moving slowly through the lecture theater, and after a few minutes, suddenly two students came hurrying into the hall – alerted by their colleagues' hastily written smartphone messages telling them that their presence was mandatory. A local action – taking attendances – was 'exported', so to speak, to different places elsewhere by means of online connections, and resulted in a reconfiguration of the local activity – two students joining the class.

This anecdote shows us that in the online-offline nexus, there are invisible lines connecting offline spaces with translocal ones; and that local activities are almost invariably influenced and shaped by translocal ones. Converted into the vocabulary we used above, we see how offline activities are almost invariably influenced and shaped by online ones. Such influences can be material, as in our anecdote in which a material space as well as its population get reconfigured due to online signals given by students. But even more frequent are *immaterial* effects of online activities on offline ones: knowledge effects, as when we cook a curry after having read several online recipes and watched some YouTube tutorials, or as when our car's GPS system directs us to take another route due to dense traffic on the normal one. The internet is primarily a *learning environment* from which we extract (and on which we upload) tons of bits of information, instructions and normative judgments about how certain things should best be done (Blommaert & Varis 2015; Dong & Blommaert 2016). In a formal sense also, the online world is a learning environment. Try to imagine studying without access to online resources these days, from online downloadable research publications over Wikipedia to simple Google searches – the contemporary world of learning is an online-offline one.

These learning environments have *immediate* effects on locally performed actions, as we have seen in the anecdote above. And these effects are inflected by the features we discussed earlier; bubble effects and algorithmically configured profiles creating peculiar forms of 'truth' and norms within often elusive online communities and with immediate feedback effects. To illustrate the latter: if you want to cook a Thai dish and choose, out of dozens of options, an online recipe using dried red chili rather than fresh one, this preference will be recorded in the algorithms and have an effect on your bubble. Later searches might show you more recipes using dried chili and let you interact with people who show the same preferences (unless the algorithm decides you've made the wrong choice and will try to rectify you in the future). In that sense, online knowledge effects may be qualitatively different from the more traditional ones. Yes, reading a book or having a conversation in a pub may have similar effects on what we think and do, but such effects were usually slower and perhaps less pervasive than the ones we currently notice in the online-offline nexus.

This is the first dimension we had to address: online resources infusing local actions and changing them due to immediate *translocal* involvement. The second dimension extends this somewhat and raises the question: who is involved in local actions – who belongs to the 'personnel' of things we observe in online life. And here, too, an anecdote can be useful as a point of departure.

Oud-Berchem is an inner-city working class and immigrant district in Antwerp, Belgium. One of the remarkable features of the neighborhood is the density of new evangelical churches, usually of the charismatic branch of protestant Christianity and run by pastors from Africa, Asia and Latin America (see Blommaert 2013). The churches are what is known as 'storefront churches', renting relatively cheap vacant commercial premises in an old shopping street and usually displaying a health and safety permit for 49 people. Local congregations can be slightly larger though, but some of the churches also cater for smaller congregations. Churches often change premises, denominations and constituencies – a reflex of the rapidly shifting demographics of the neighborhood.

One of the most recent arrivals in this religious industry in Oud-Berchem is a church run by a Nigerian pastor. Let us nickname the church the 'True Religion Church of Christ'. The church rented what is probably the grottiest location in the neighborhood: a former interior decoration shop closed down a handful of years back, quite badly affected by years of vacancy and exposure to the elements. The church has a permit for 49 attendants, and this is about the size of the congregation attending Saturday and Sunday services there. It's a small, hardly remarkable and even less prestigious enterprise.

Our initial research on the neighborhood and its churches was based on traditional – read: offline – ethnographic linguistic landscape analysis. From that perspective, indeed, the True Religion Church of Christ is a small local phenomenon, eclipsed by other churches with more attractive premises and a larger congregation. At a given moment, however, we started paying more attention to an often overlooked feature of the linguistic landscape: website addresses and social media signs of the 'Follow us on Facebook' type (Blommaert & Maly 2019). When we followed such pointers for the True Religion Church of Christ, we bumped into a few surprises. Its pastor turns out to be a modest global celebrity in the domain of charismatic protestant religion. He runs a YouTube channel with over 125,000 subscribers; the main feature video there is one in which the pastor brings a dead boy back to life during a service in Nigeria, attended by many hundreds of faithful. This video was watched over 85,000 times. The pastor also runs a website in which he announces services all over the world – North America, Europe and Africa – and through which items and services can be booked and ordered using standard e-payment methods such as Paypal.

Suddenly, the grotty premises in which the local congregation gathers on Saturdays and Sundays appear in a different light: as a mere node in a global network of religious activities

connected by advanced online infrastructures. This global network is big and prestigious, and stands in sharp contrast to the smallness and shabbiness of what goes on in Oud-Berchem. Many more people, places and resources are involved in what goes on in Oud-Berchem than those that can be locally observed. And we can reasonably assume that what goes on locally in the True Religion Church of Christ derives a lot of its meaning and impact from the translocal, prestigious and well-resourced network in which it is one local node and to which it is permanently connected by online infrastructures. In fact, what happens locally is probably *possible* only because of the existence of this larger network and its online resources. And so, when we observe the local activities of the church's congregation, we need to be aware of the fact we see just a very small part of the total social fact we need to understand, and which we can engage with by following the pointers that take us online.

So here are the two dimensions we needed to bring up: the fact that offline practices are almost invariably influenced, formatted and enabled by online ones; and the fact that locally performed social actions can involve far more people than those actually present locally – the effective personnel of lots of current social actions can only be gauged by connecting the offline local phenomena with the online translocal ones. Our field has effectively become an online-offline field; doing fieldwork requires presence in and attention to both, and the blissful simplicity of 'the local' has been traded for a far more complex reality of connected fieldwork sites. The notion of 'participant observation' needs to be literally in the online-offline nexus: ethnographers are *participating* in exactly the same contextualized processes they are studying, and there is no privileged vantage point that gives us and edge over other, 'ordinary' participants.

More complexity? More ethnography please!

All of this is bad news of course. In the online-offline nexus, we are forced to surrender some of the things we long thought were relatively simply: the things our field had to offer in the way of observable facts and information, the people with whom we engaged in fieldwork, and the actual sites of fieldwork. In other words: we need to reconsider the what, how and where of fieldwork. The online-offline nexus, we can see, is quite a bit more complex than the good old traditional offline fieldwork arena.

The bad news, however, is mainly for those branches of science that rely heavily on the assumptions we questioned above. And there are several reasons why ethnography, while needing to be cautious and more than just aware of these changes, is best equipped to deal

with them. In chapter 2, we explained that ethnography is a scholarly approach which, in contrast to many other approaches, does not attempt to simplify and reduce complexity; it takes complexity as a point of departure and tries to provide a full and detailed account of it. Ethnography is not about removing the chaotic nature of social practices performed in real, concrete contexts – it is about making sense of that chaos. The fact that the chaos appears to become denser in the online-offline nexus should not deter us: it's still just chaos, and we must make sense of it.

And we have inroads into it. Even if the what, who and where of fieldwork are getting more complicated, there are things we can reliably observe. We can still observe *what people do*, the social actions they perform. In fact – and we emphasized that as well in the opening chapters of the book – ethnography is focused on making sense of social action, of *concrete* social action performed in concrete contexts, and it belongs to that broad tradition in social research captured under the umbrella of the 'action perspective' (cf. Blumer 1969; Goodwin & Goodwin 1992; Strauss 1993; Rawls 2002). So we can observe people watching online stuff, doing online searches, asking and responding to questions, telling stories, making an argument, insulting or responding to insults, expressing joy, appreciation and gratefulness, grief, anger, uneasiness, concern, irony and humor, thanking others; we can observe them liking, sharing and reposting, commenting and endorsing or distancing themselves; we can observe them incorporating online material produced by others in their own online interventions; we can see them logging on and logging off; subscribing to channels and profiles and blocking or ignoring others. And we can observe the (largely visual, literate) *resources* they deploy in doing all that: different forms of language, jargon and slang, different forms of writing, emojis, memes, GIFs, selfies, profile and banner images, video chats and livestreams on a variety of apps – name it. All of this, we know, is done *in interaction* with others, frontstage as well as backstage – one is never alone on the Web – and mediated by the specifics of the online contexts we laid out above.

That's *a lot*. In fact, it's exactly the stuff needed for ethnographic work, as we explained in chapter 2 of the book. And it is by looking at the intricate interplay between actions and resources that we are able – in ethnographic analysis – to see how people navigate the contextual opacity and the identity uncertainties that often characterize online interactions and make sense of that chaotic reality (cf. Szabla & Blommaert 2017), how they engage in the learning processes for which the online world offers such infinite opportunities, and construct

identities and communities within their bubbles, and often beyond them (Varis & Blommaert 2015; Prochazka & Blommaert 2019).

So it is not because we cannot observe everything in online contexts that we can observe nothing. We cannot observe the algorithms and surveillance systems that create bubbles and profiles, true. But we can observe, with some degree of precision, the ways in which people engage with them and operate within their confines – how they adjust their social conduct to the complex and largely invisible contexts within which they interact with others. This is an eminently adequate ethnographic object of inquiry.

But we need to address it carefully. Whenever the phrase 'participant observation' was used in discussions of fieldwork, the focus used to be on 'observation', and it carried the suggestion that, while participating in social processes, ethnographers did something special and did that from a privileged position – they 'observed'. We believe that fieldwork in the online-offline nexus shifts that focus towards 'participant', and that we must forget the possibility of a privileged position of observation. Whatever we observe is observed *as* a participant in a new field in which breaking out of the contexts of ordinary participation is near-impossible, for important aspects of such contexts are impossible to inspect – the backstage aspects we discussed above. Perhaps this was *never* possible, even in traditional offline fieldwork, and perhaps it was just (in Johannes Fabian's (1983) famous view) the conventional arrogance of academia that created the claim towards privileged knowledge positions. In that case, the online-offline nexus confronts us with an unpleasant truth – one which must prompt us to a fundamental adjustment of our approaches and practices, and so renders our work more complex but equally more interesting.

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